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ABSTRACT

Many of the most popular books comprising the young adult literature boom--the romances--continue to fail female readers in three ways. First, some of the most frequently recommended books for young adults portray worlds that are almost exclusively masculine. Second, even the books that appear to deal fairly equally with male and female characters are often just updated versions of the old children's readers in which boys do things while girls watch admiringly. Finally, there are those well-written, much recommended novels in which girls do take center stage but in which the female protagonists do not show characteristics most intelligent young readers would wish to emulate. There are some good books with fine young heroines, but there is a need for more good books with attractive admirable, young women characters--young women with some of Nancy Drew's independence and dash, but more realistically portrayed. (JL)

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Still Far from Equal:
Young Women in Literature for Adolescents

Bea Knodel

As anyone who is concerned with young adults and their reading, and who pays even the most casual attention to bookstore shelves and book reviews, must be aware, the biggest current news in YA publishing is the rapid growth in the demand for those books labeled "romances." In fact the burgeoning number of trade names, titles, and sales--especially all-important sales--of romances may well turn out to be the YA publishing news of the decade.

The trend began a few years ago with enormous sales of Harlequin Romances and of books by such writers as Barbara Cartland to junior and senior high girls, even though these books are, in theory at least, aimed at an audience of adult women. The teenage market for romances proved to be so great that publishers began designing and marketing series especially for young readers. Scholastic, for example, has its "Wildifire" series and its "Wishing Star," Bantam its "Sweet Dreams," Simon and Schuster its "First Love." The series titles tell the story! And these series, with others like--much like--them, are selling, selling, selling. They're being snatched up by eager young consumers who can, apparently, hardly wait for each new volume.

What teachers, librarians, and parents have to ask is why, when quality young adult books are steadily improving, when serious authors who are skilled writers are publishing books with reasonably rounded characters, carefully constructed plots, and themes of genuine concern to adolescents, young women readers in droves are choosing instead books in which the writing is pedestrian at best, the characters range from plastic to cardboard, the plots are absolutely predictable, and the themes are almost exclusively "boy gets girl," or rather "girl gets boy." Perhaps, in fact, it is a mistake to speak of "themes"; the more appropriate word is "theme."

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Of course this theme has perennial interest to young girls. And obviously these books are offering their readers something they want, and for which they feel a need. Part of what they want is to read about young women who, no matter how unrealistic they may be, are doing things the reader can day dream about doing herself, and who are the kinds of people the reader can imagine that she herself is--or at least that she might be!

There is a clue as to what young adolescent girls want to read in a series that was popular long before the romances appeared--the Nancy Drew series. Nancy Drew has been a mainstay of young girls' reading for many years, not only because of her adventures, which make the books guaranteed page turners, but because of her personal characteristics. Nancy is intelligent, independent, and able to cope with any eventuality; she invariably accomplishes anything she sets out to do. Realistic? No. What generations of girls have dreamed of being and doing? Certainly.

In contrast with the wish fulfillment of Nancy Drew or of the formula romances currently attracting such enormous and fervid readership, what is offered to teenage girls by the young adult books which win critical acclaim and find places on "recommended" lists? What do these books provide in the way of characters for young women to like or to wish to emulate?

Some do offer strong, likeable, and even admirable young women characters; too many fail female readers in one of three ways. First, some of the most frequently recommended books for young adults portray worlds which are almost exclusively masculine. The novels of S. E. Hinton, for example, for all their enormous popularity, focus squarely on male characters. A woman wrote them, and girls do read them, but essentially they are books about boys. Also focused on boys are Robert Newton Peck's fine novel, A Day No Pigs Would Die and the novels of Robert Cormier, who is surely among the most admired current writers for

young adults. The Chocolate War, with its boys' school setting, is as totally male dominated as Lord of the Flies and A Separate Peace was before it. And I Am the Cheese is a masculine story. While there is a strong female character, Kate, in Cormier's After the First Death, the book still is centered around masculine characters. These are books, in Hemingway's phrase, of "men without women."

A second category of books which, while good in themselves, fail young women readers, includes the sort of book which appears to deal fairly equally with male and female characters, but which is just a new version of the old children's readers in which boys do things and girls watch admiringly. M. E. Kerr's Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack suggests by its title that Dinky (whose real name is Susan) is the central character, but the focus is not on her but on Tucker. The four young characters in this novel present an interesting sample of the problems female and male adolescents have in young adult literature, and of the ways they deal with those problems. Tucker is the extremely likeable young man from whose point of view Kerr (choosing limited omniscience rather than a first person narrator) tells her story. He copes well with a temporarily unemployed father, a mother whose decision to go to law school means that Tucker has to do some cooking and exercise some patience, and his first ventures into dating. These are not earth shaking problems, and Tucker handles them with humor and, for the most part, success. The obese Dinky is less successful in coping with her do-gooder mother, a formidable problem indeed, and with her own enormous girth, but there are, at the novel's end, glimmers of hope for improvement. Natalia, Dinky's cousin, is, throughout the book, recovering from mental illness. She does not so much solve her problem as deal with it on a day-to-day basis. Finally there is P. John, Tucker's friend, and the novel's real achiever. P. John is, at the book's beginning, as overweight as Dinky and abrasive as

well. By the novel's climax, however, when Dinky is fatter and more unhappy than ever, P. John has, on his own, become thin and attractive, and developed a rather sensational new personality. (Boys do things; girls, at best, watch.)

In Paul Zindel's The Pigman John and Lorraine, the two teenage narrators, share telling the story, but in their relationship it is Lorraine's admiration, or love, if you will, for John that comes through. John is not an adoring boy--a boy offering the near-chivalric devotion to a girl--that the young men in the romances offer. Of course The Pigman is more realistic, but girls looking for wish-fulfillment are going to prefer to read about the girl who is cherished in the best sentimental romantic fashion.

One other book which can serve as an example for this category is Lois Duncan's Killing Mr. Griffin. In this story of five high school students who kill their English teacher, the two girls who are involved "go along." One, a pretty, fluffy, popular girl, would presumably go along with whatever activity is "in," even murder. The other is lured into the plot because she is needed as an accomplice; she is attracted easily by a popular boy's kindness and pretended interest, and the suggestion is that a girl will do anything for a promise of popularity. This suggestion may, of course, have an element of truth, but it is not the stuff of "sweet dreams" or "first love." Girls generally would prefer the vision of a boy who would climb the highest mountain for his beloved to the picture of one simply using a girl.

Finally there are those well written, much recommended novels in which girls do take center stage but in which the female protagonists do not show characteristics most intelligent young readers would wish to emulate. Often the girls are, in one way or another, victims. One may think, for example, of all those pregnancy books, going from Jeannette Eyerly's A Girl Like Me through book after book back to--Eyerly again--Bonnie Jo, Go Home. Or one may think about the drug addict diarist in Go Ask Alice, the rape victim in Richard Peck's Are You in

the House Alone?, the young prostitute in Fran Arrick's Steffie Can't Come Out to Play, or the varied victims in Duncan's Daughters of Eve. These are often good books. They are well written. They have some things to say. But they do not give young female readers strong female protagonists to admire and to identify with.

There are, obviously, some good books with fine young heroines available. One old, still worthwhile, standby is Elizabeth George Speare's The Witch of Blackbird Pond; an engaging contemporary novel enjoyed by young teens in Paula Danziger's The Cat Ate My Gymsuit. But there is a need for more good books with attractive, admirable young women characters--young women with some of Nancy Drew's independence and dash, but realistically portrayed. Perhaps if girls can find, in well written, well plotted books, young heroines with whom they can identify or whom they can recognize as people they would like to know, at least some of them will abandon the cotton candy romances and move on to more substantial fare.

Titles Mentioned

For information concerning available paperback editions of these titles, see Paperbound Books in Print, published annually by R. R. Bowker Company.

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